

## **Berlin after Vico and Herder: Romanticism as the basis of liberalism**

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In this essay an exploration of the connection between the ideas from the Enlightened period and one of the major political currents of our time – liberalism- will be held. For this, the reading that Isaiah Berlin makes of the theories of Vico and Herder defending them from the accusations of relativism of which they are a recurrent target will be taken as a starting point.

I have not chosen liberalism as a means of assessing the impact of Romantic thought in our days by coincidence, but precisely because I understand liberalism –conceived in a specific way but also in its broadest sense- as one of the most representative theories of contemporary Western society. Liberalism, as will be explained, lays its theoretical base on a compendium of some of the most essential values of Western society, and it also exists exclusively as a means of preserving these. Thus, if liberalism is an example of the values of our society as representative as I understand, assessing the connection between its development and the Romantic thought will demonstrate the deep influence of the latter on the first. In order to explain this, I will first focus the reading that Berlin makes of Vico and Herder's work to move to the implications of what he called value-pluralism. Then I will briefly explain to what extent this value-pluralism lies in the core of liberalism, and also I will assess how liberalism entails the most fundamental values of contemporary Western societies, proving the fact that liberalism is nothing else but a reflection of the aspects of the work of Vico and Herder that Berlin considered more relevant.

Even though chronologically Vico and Herder are normally placed within the framework of the Enlightenment, the conceptualization of history and of human societies that they make they stands against it. If the Enlightenment meant the sovereignty of reason and a methodical classification of reality, what Vico and Herder did was precisely to oppose this, denying the possibility of establishing a single human truth as a unit of measure of all the provinces of human thought by the application of the laws of the natural sciences. Because of this, they are sometimes called relativists- but in the 'softer' sense, that is to say, they do not deny the possibility of objective knowledge through the natural sciences.

While Vico looked at the development of humanity through its history, Herder chose to examine different nationalities and human groups, both aiming to achieve a clearer understanding of the world we inhabit. Vico defends the idea that each stage of the historical cycle of cultures embodies its own autonomous values and its own conception of the world and of its relationship to it, and therefore it is only through this view that we could understand them. Each of these cultures is for Vico a phase of a providential plan governed by divine purpose. However, in this plan there is not a single end or goal towards which all the cultures evolve. Each one of this stages can represent an end in itself, each culture is autonomous and they cannot be understood in perfectly

equivalent terms. This does not imply by any means that no judgment of different societies and cultures can be made because everything is relative, but on the contrary it means that many objective ends exist, even though these ends might vary from one society to another and even appear as incompatible with others. What Vico was doing asserting such things was to outline what should be seen as the core of value-pluralism: the idea of incommensurability. Incommensurability implies that values cannot be weighed or measured, and thus it is impossible to establish rational priorities amongst them. It is impossible to classify goods or evils as better or worse options, and therefore, as stated by Gray: “*incommensurability doesn't mean equality, indifference or the insignificance of our choices: it shows the inability of reason to guide our actions*” (Gray,200:52). Strictly it means that they cannot be measured in terms of some finite quantity of a third value – such as utility.

However, it is very easy to see why accusations of relativism are often directed against ideas like those of Vico and Herder. To this, Berlin tries to explain that they do not hold a relativist view of nature but rather a pluralist view. Pluralism does not entail relativism at all, it is not even contrary to radical objectivism, since each particular value or goal held by an individual, group or society should be regarded as autonomous and equally valid for itself. (Berlin,1990:ch.1).

These values might be regarded in different ways depending on each individual or social context, but they still hold a certain degree of universal association. Herder states that “*each nation has its centre of happiness within itself, just as every sphere has its own centre of gravity*” (Herder,2002:233): even if that centre of gravity varies from one society to another, at least the idea of the centre of gravity is universally valid. This is what allows intercultural understanding: the existence of certain universal principles that, although not always universally appreciated in the same way, are universally recognized. However, this cannot be understood as a mere cultural relativism, as it does not support an idea of absolute equality and validity of different cultures. Regarding this, Berlin states the existence of a minimum degree of humanity, as there is: “*a limit beyond which we can no longer understand what a given creature is at, what kind of rules it follows in its behavior, what its gestures mean. In such situations, when the possibility of communication breaks down, we speak of derangement, of incomplete humanity*” (Berlin,1997:80). This limit is thus defined by means of universal cultural –or moral- values: it is only when something cannot be universally understood –and to understand something does not mean defending it, or sympathizing with it- when it is considered inhuman, and therefore, undesirable. If value pluralism was to be a relativist theory, everything, even those things that cannot be understood, should be tolerated.

Thus, the engagement that Berlin creates between liberalism and value-pluralism is obvious: if value pluralism is true and all our goals and values are incommensurable, and therefore cannot be judged by the means of reason, then the best political system possible is the one that does not impose a single concept of good, but instead respects the different existent conceptions of it. A logical conclusion of this will be, then, what stands as one of the major points of

liberalism but also one of the foundations of contemporary mentalities: that no rational choice can be made, as there is no single path to follow. Contrary to Aristotelian ideas of “good life”, and to utilitarian politics, a broad variety of ways of human flourishing exists, and even these can very often flourish in contradictory, mutually excluding forms. However, again, this doesn’t mean that everything is equally valid- We act following objective values, even if the contents of these values can vary from one moral frame to another. This also clashes with any conception of absolute values, such as Kantian or Aristotelian ethics.

If value pluralism can be defined as a non-relativist theory, this implies that it has to stand for a certain set of principles: the goals proclaimed by value pluralism are very clearly defined (Crowder,2002). Value pluralism entails liberalism as it creates the perfect conditions for the realization of the value that pluralistic ideals signify themselves. And amongst all the values that pluralism could support, Berlin speaks of one essential feature of human nature: the pursuit each man’s individual convictions. *“To realise the relative validity of one’s convictions... and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilised man from a barbarian.”* (Berlin, 1997:172) Value pluralism leads to a self-constructivist conception of mankind: a human can only be considered as such if it is able to decide amongst a variety of options –and consequently rejecting others- creating its own path to follow: here is where the echoes of Romanticism can be clearly heard. A man is the result of his choices, which should never be imposed or influenced by a higher authority. Hierarchies are to be refuted, then. However, since these convictions can only be defended if they surpass the minimal limit of human nature, pluralism proves to be objective rather than subjective. With value pluralism being an objective theory, it is not bold to state that it aims at some concrete goals, and liberalism can be clearly identified as the best political system possible when achieving them (Crowder,2002).

Liberalism can be defined as *“a style of political theory that emphasizes individual liberty and views the state as a coercive institution whose principal purpose lies in the protection of individuals from interference with their liberty from other individuals and from other states”* (Talisie,2004:P129). I regard liberalism, nonetheless, as a genuinely contemporary Western political ideology, inasmuch as it has played a fundamental role forming a society that finds in the preservation of the plurality precisely its best unifying tool. When observed from the perspective of political theory, Romanticism seems to be, in some way, the starting point of contemporary European politics. Nothing else but freedom, should be praised, and it cannot be guaranteed that all men stand in a solid ground of a shared rationality. This idea is clearly informed by the Romantic thought as it places the focus upon the uniqueness of man and tries to preserve it above anything else. Thus, from the Enlightenment onwards European politics have been based on discord. However, since we acknowledge our individuality, and furthermore, because we aim to defend it before anything else, we build our common life, our politics, upon the base of reasonable disagreement (Tully,2002:207). This implies, of course, that nothing is ever clear nor predefined, and moreover, the possibility of finding a single

satisfactory answer –I will not even dare to call it a *correct* answer- within a social setting of plurality is very unlikely, not to say impossible. This is nonetheless a good thing since the fact that dilemmas arise is a sign of liberty, inasmuch as they are a mere consequence of the right to choose freely and according to individual criteria: it is precisely because ‘*we recognize rational personal responsibility*’ (Popper, 1945:186) that we live in free societies: the individual freedom that liberalism wishes to defend implies also the idea of individuals being ultimately responsible for their own actions.

This is how free liberal societies- just like in the contemporary Western world-work, by embracing and acknowledging diversity and giving each individual the same rights and respect: that is to say, by allowing their individual aims to flourish and by letting each individual voluntarily decide how to manage their own lives. And this kind of ideas are the ones that have shaped the development of Western culture since the Romantic period. All in all, if we all agree in something it is in the fact that politics is not about truth, but about taking decisions in the absence of truth. And I could not think of a better way to illustrate the Romantic conceptualization of the world than this acceptance of the lack of absolute certainty that is not necessarily a nihilist relativism, but rather an open door to a world of endless possibilities and unlimited development.

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